

Dominick P. Purpura – An Appreciation

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There is no question in my mind: my appointment of Dom Purpura as Dean of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine (AECOM) was one of the most inspired and felicitous appointments of the many I have made in the course of my 27-year Presidency of Yeshiva University.

I value his reputation as a distinguished brain scientist. It has added luster to both the medical school and the University. In addition, I respect him as a foremost strategic thinker in the world and especially in American medicine. Closer to home, where I had the opportunity to observe and evaluate his work as an academic leader, he earned my admiration for the way he conducted the affairs of Einstein throughout his decanal career. I often wondered at his stamina in successfully leading a group of brilliant scientists, most of whom are not exactly wilting wallflowers. Keeping the peace in an institution governed by self-assured, eminent medical scientists, each with fully developed, unassailable, and incontrovertible ideas on how to run a medical school, is an unenviable task second only to undertaking the running of a whole university of such independent souls (a mission best left to those sufficiently inexperienced to realize that it brings with it occasional successes at the expense of Excedrin-type frustrations and heartache). Both positions require a readiness for self-sacrifice for a cause one must believe in implicitly and whole-heartedly. That will explain why I saw in him a kindred soul—and a superior mind. The deanship of AECOM is a job for a person of superior talents, with genuine love of the science of medicine, loyalty to colleagues, dedication to health on the broadest levels, and a capacity for endless masochism.

But most of all, I cherish him and Penny as dear friends. During the years of our very pleasant and happy relationship, Dom was a beacon of stability and a source of sage counsel. I trusted his advice on problems of the medical college and, as well, frequently solicited his opinions on other university matters. He was always reasonable, thoughtful, deliberate and wise. He understood the special nature of Yeshiva University and its mission, and appreciated how Einstein fit into the picture. And I reciprocated by learning from him the unique characteristics of medical research and the men and women who pursue it with dogged determination and the uniqueness of Einstein in particular. Not once in all these years did I feel that there was any tension at all between myself, an Orthodox Rabbi of Polish-Galician descent, and this agnostic lapsed Catholic Sicilian.

In the early years of his tenure as Dean, he decided that I ought to have first-hand knowledge of what his most eminent colleagues were doing in their laboratories. So, educator that he is, he devised a plan that soon was copied by others of our professional schools. He arranged for me to be tutored at the medical college by groups of three or four distinguished researchers. I thus got first-hand information on topics as varied as molecular biology, diabetes, cancer, and a host of other specialties. It was something I looked forward to with enthusiasm, and I learned to appreciate the enormous talent of the Einstein faculty (I casually offered to reciprocate by tutoring him in Talmud, but we never got around to it. Maybe now that both of us have retired...).

I should note with gratitude one special endowment of his that has helped markedly in his fund-raising for Einstein and his smooth relationships with the Board of Overseers. And that is his command of the English language, his talent for always having something new and interesting to say, and the ability to persuade his audience. In my experience, I have rarely met a more eloquent and literate public speaker and I consider myself a bit of a maven in this area.

I am not qualified to assess his or anyone else's scientific achievements, but I feel sufficiently confident to judge who is or who is not a reputable academician and a true intellectual. Dom's range of interests is little short of amazing. Here is an illustration: A few years ago, my wife and I were traveling by air, and we changed planes in a Mid-Western airport. Out of nowhere there appeared Dom and his delightful wife Penny (who is worthy of an "appreciation" in her own right) and we greeted each other warmly. They were obviously on vacation, because Dom was wearing one of those loud Hawaiian shirts that virtually screamed out at you, "Don't bother me; I'm not at work now!" But I didn't take the sartorial hint. I noticed that he was lugging a fairly impressive volume, and suspected that it was some kind of tome on the brain or some other organ. After all, what other than a hefty anatomy volume would a bio-scientist in his discipline be carrying with him? So, shamelessly, I grabbed at the book, and said, "Let's see what kind of reading you're taking along on your vacation." My shock was palpable: no anatomy, no brain text, no other volume related to his life's work, certainly not a popular novel or a detective story, but a volume by arguably the most famous philosopher of the 20th century—some say since Immanuel Kant—Ludwig Wittgenstein. I could not believe that anyone would take along the *Tractatus*

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Logico-Philosophicus as light vacation reading. But that is Dom Purpura—a man of Catholic tastes, of irrepressible intellectual curiosity, one who is willing to spend his “free time” delving into one of the most impenetrable philosophical tracts written in dense, opaque style, enough to ward off even professors of philosophy. Dom Purpura—a true polymath.

Dom has been a role model for his professional colleagues everywhere, and especially for his fellow scientists at Einstein. He has set high standards for every serious scholar in all branches of the University—whether in law, social work, psychology, or Judaic Studies; even our Talmudists have been inspired by their occasional but all too infrequent encounter with Dom’s rare combination of personal integrity and charm and his extremely high standards of scholarship. All of this has filtered down to the students, and has thus raised the level of scholarly aspirations throughout the university. He has been

my personal role model too in undertaking academic leadership of first rate faculties.

I assure Dom that there *is* life after retirement, and it need not be bland and boring. His particular gifts need not be confined to the limits of decanal authority. The worlds of medicine, of science, of scholarship await his authoritative contributions. His successor will no doubt consider himself fortunate that Dom will be available for advice and encouragement. And he should not give up his early morning jogging to which, thankfully, he never invited me to join him.

Let me sum it up by using a well-known Yiddishism: Dom is a *mensch*—a full, superior, wise, gentle, benevolent human being. A rare type indeed, one whom I hope will allow me to benefit from his friendship for many years to come.